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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the background, advantages, and disadvantages of the televised presidential press conference, citing the opinions of numerous newspaper and magazine writers. After presenting a brief overview of the presidential press conference from the administration of Theodore Roosevelt to that of Eisenhower, the report discusses the type and frequency of televised press conferences held by presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford. Special attention is given to the ways in which televising the conferences has affected their nature. Final sections of the report examine advantages the televised presidential press conference has for the public, for the president, and for participating reporters; outlines negative aspects of the televised presidential press conference; and presents suggestions for reform as well as for abolition of the institution. (GW)

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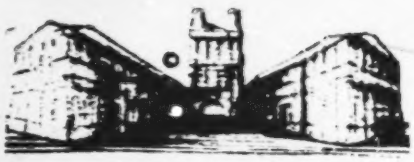

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 339

PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES

This report was written by SUSAN E. MOORE, an M.A. candidate in the School of Journalism.

Introduction

American Presidents have from the beginning recognized the importance of keeping the public informed. Even George Washington, who, in some ways, was suspicious of the press and cautious in his dealings with it, recognized the need to keep the people informed. In his farewell address he said: "In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."

The President has a greater capacity to dramatize events than does any other politician. To be effective, he must develop a style of media use which is consistent with his personal capabilities. The revolution in electronic media has given him the means to reach the public with unparalleled ease and speed. One of the means is the presidential press conference.

A press conference can be a better gauge of a President's conduct in office than a prepared television speech. Thus, the character and value of the press conference can be expected to differ from one administration to another, depending upon who holds the office. There is no single wholly satisfactory method of conducting a press conference, as the format must be tailored to the personality of the President and the general expectations of the time.

Of course, different administrations have had problems with the conference; but most of these problems were short-lived or of a personal nature and were solved when new men took office. There are some problems, however, which are woven into the foundations of the conference and continue to plague the institution today. One basic problem, first encountered during the Kennedy administration, concerns the use of television for conferences.

A Brief History of the Press Conference

The presidential press conference has been part of the American scene for more than half a century. Theodore Roosevelt was first to put the conference on a regular basis. He answered reporters' questions freely but permitted no direct quotations.

Woodrow Wilson continued the practice until World War I. Wilson expressed the belief that it was his responsibility to keep the public informed and that regular press conferences offered the best means to do so. An embarrassing error regarding the interpretation of a treaty resulted in Warren Harding's requiring that questions be submitted in advance. That practice was continued by Coolidge and Hoover.

This restriction was removed by Franklin Roosevelt. During his administration, the conference became an open question-and-answer forum. Roosevelt did, however, require that he not be quoted directly unless specific permission was obtained.

Eisenhower removed this final restriction by permitting radio and television recordings and direct quotation from stenographic reports of his remarks. The advent of television and radio into conferences provided both an opportunity for the President to express his views to the general public and an opportunity for the general public to observe the President under pressure. Friend and enemy alike conceded that, once admitted to the press conference, it would be extremely difficult to get the camera out.

Even the pre-taped news conferences were full of hazards, as Eisenhower learned on August 24, 1960. The 1960 presidential campaign was going on at the time, and Edward T. Folliard reports (**America**, 3-7-64) that Republican strategists were emphasizing Richard Nixon's vast political experience. A reporter asked Eisenhower if he could cite an example of a "major idea" offered by Mr. Nixon and adopted by the administration.

"If you give me a week I might think of one," Eisenhower said. "I don't remember."

The final step was taken by John F. Kennedy when he permitted the direct live telecasts of most of the conferences he held.

Kennedy Goes Live

John F. Kennedy's presidency helped change the balance of American politics, largely due to television. By the time his administration ended, the President had come to play a dominant role in American life. He and the men surrounding him began to take on roles previously held only by Hollywood stars.

Speculation as to changes in Kennedy's press conference prior to television included the free-for-all format which places the President in the position of giving split-second responses to questions requiring detailed answers.

Summary: Presidents come and go, and each conducts his press conferences differently. Certain features of the institution remain the same. Both permanent and temporary attributes have often led to doubts about the conferences' effectiveness.

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Eisenhower had continued the practice of having the reporter identify himself whenever he asked a question. This led to questions being asked solely to get the reporter's name and newspaper published in the White House transcripts for prestige purposes. Kennedy put an end to that. The only other major change was carrying the conference live on nationwide radio and television, mainly during the evening hours.

Response to the original idea was mixed, but on the whole favorable. Defenders argued that the voters could now see for themselves how the President handled difficult questions of public policy and draw their own conclusions.

"Kennedy is going further in the right direction," said (**Editor & Publisher**, 1-7-61) Robert J. Donovan of the New York **Herald Tribune**. Sig Mickelson, president of CBS News, thought Kennedy's willingness to face the camera would prod public officials at other levels of government to do the same.

Many newspapermen, however, disagreed. James Reston of the New York **Times** termed Kennedy's decision "the goofiest idea since the hula hoop." Elie Abel of ABC News cited the danger that Kennedy might make a statement which could be misinterpreted abroad. He was also afraid that television would bring out the ham in the reporters. Arthur Krock, also of the New York **Times**, said only, "It's an irresponsible way to conduct the Presidency."

Kennedy used a variety of techniques and formats and transformed the press conference into a totally public meeting. The press presence often provided only an excuse for a meeting during which the President used television to reach beyond them to the public. Before his time, press conferences were primarily meetings between the President and professional journalists. From the start of the Kennedy administration, however, these conferences were converted into sessions between the President and the public at large, with the reporters serving only as questioners and an immediate audience.

It was estimated that 65 million people in 21.5 million homes viewed Kennedy's first televised press conference. To a man, all agreed that he performed brilliantly, sprinkling his remarks with quotations from poets and appearing on top of his job. But one article pointed out (**Harper's**, 5-61) that Kennedy did make two trivial misstatements. He made others in subsequent conferences, all trivial. But there was always the possibility, the article continued, that these misstatements would not be trivial.

Later in Kennedy's administration, critics of the televised press conference were more vocal. The **New Yorker**'s Richard Rovere, even went so far as to say (2-4-61) that the inherent weakness in the press conference's televised form would eventually result in its abandonment—

> Even when it has an exciting and unifying theme, it tends to be untidy, abrupt and inconclusive. Interest can be sustained by dramatic announcements, but if one were sought for each televised appearance of the President, the administration would have a massive security problem on its hands.

Nevertheless, the first live conferences were so successful that they set the standards for all future conferences. It was still possible, of course, for tapes to be played on the air in their entirety after a conference, but the chances that this would be done were slight.

Johnson Tries Informality

Lyndon Johnson began his term with an uncertain approach to formal conferences. While he welcomed them as a means to express himself, he knew he lacked the personal magnetism of Kennedy, and therefore was leery of their all-revealing nature. He appreciated the televised conference as a means of reaching millions of Americans who didn't normally see newspapers, but he doubted his ability to project favorably over the medium.[4]

Johnson's first press conference was an informal coffee break. When 25 White House reporters went to Press Secretary Salinger's office for a routine briefing, they were suddenly whisked into the Oval Office, where Johnson was sitting in a rocking chair, pouring coffee. Reporters were somewhat reluctant to ask harsh, probing questions of the man who had just poured their coffee.

Next, Johnson became experimental with his conferences. He held them between bales of hay on the LBJ Ranch, in the crowded White House theater, and in seven laps around the White House grounds (while running along and trying to take notes, one reporter ran into a post and split open his head).[5]

All these conferences strengthened Johnson's repuation as an unpredictable person — and they kept him away from the televised spectacular.

In December, 1964, the Freedom of Information Committee of Sigma Delta Chi, the society of professional journalists, criticized (Des Moines **Register**, 12-1-64) Johnson's impromptu press conferences. The committee said that the calling of conferences only a few minutes in advance tended to keep away specialists in fields such as foreign affairs.

Johnson did not hold a regular news conference until he had been President for more than three months. Douglas Kiker, then a New York **Herald Tribune** correspondent, wrote (**Atlantic**, 12-66):

> Johnson's press conferences resemble the bouillabaisse concocted by the chef in one of those questionable restaurants not listed in the touring guide. It is included on the menu only when he is in the mood to prepare it. The quality greatly varies. It is a bit too thick and mushy, and often so overcooked that the ingredients are indistinguishable. It has a strong aroma. A little of it goes a long way. And there are lots of surprises in the bottom of the pot.

Johnson misused the medium during his televised conferences. Rather then going over the reporters' heads to the public, Johnson chose to eye the reporters. And there was a defensiveness about his manner that revealed his opinion of the press.

The Washington press corps was highly agitated when it became clear that the formal press conference was falling into disuse. In the space of only a few years, the press and the public had become accustomed to conferences announced at least a day in advance, attended by 200 to 400 newsmen and equipped for radio and television coverage. It was Johnson, however, who laid down the rules for the conferences, and the small ones appeared to be his favorites.

The editors of **The Reporter** believed (1-2-64) that the possibility of getting more information was greater in the small conferences. Just as Johnson felt he was more effective in the smaller gatherings, so might the reporters do a better job. If one were to include informal gatherings, Johnson would easily rank as one of the most accessible of presidents.

The major complaint with these "quickie" conferences,

however, was that only White House regulars, whose job it was to cover Johnson, were able to attnd. The absence of specialists meant that the questioning often was not as pointed or as full of insight as it had been when Kennedy exposed himself to the experts from the State Department and other agencies. In that respect, Johnson was using the White House regulars to make himself look good. Johnson's final Press Secretary, George Christian, said (New York Times, 1-20-69) at the end of that administration, however, that if Johnson had to do it all over again, he would hold more televised news conferences.

Nixon: The Death of the Press Conference

Under Richard Nixon, the press conference threatened to become a vanishing institution, "the political equivalent of the whooping crane."[1] In his five-and-one-half years as President, Nixon held as many press conferences (37) as Franklin Roosevelt held in his first three months. Of these 37 conferences, only 20 were televised.

In June of 1972, Nixon held his first televised conference in more than a year. CBS White House reporter Robert Pierpoint asked him why he avoided live conferences.

"It isn't that I'm afraid to do it," Nixon said. "I have to determine the best way of communication . . . . Every President has got to make a decision when he enters office about his relations with the press . . . ."[2]

When he came into office, Nixon had promised an open Presidency in terms of making information available to the media. In a 1971 conference on the presidential press conference, Herb Klein, White House communications director, outlined the White House position:

> 1. The press conference is the President's and not something that belongs to the press.
> 2. It is only one of several means the President uses — along with speeches, statements, messages to Congress — to communicate with the public.

Klein admitted that, looking at government communications as he had for the two years of the Nixon administration, he found that there were areas in which the government had withheld information. However, he argued that the administration had made gains against this.[3]

One major reason cited by Nixon for his failure to hold regular televised press conferences was the quality of the questions asked. John Ehrlichman said, "He doesn't get very good questions at press conferences. He goes in there for half an hour and gets a lot of flabby and fairly dumb questions. It doesn't really elucidate very much."

In discussing Nixon and television, David Wise argues (**The Atlantic**, 4-73) that one must distinguish between television as a mechanical method of communication and television as an intellectual instrument. As President, Wise says, Nixon's use of television flowed logically from this idea. Thus, at every opportunity, Nixon would solemnly address the nation; but he would avoid the give-and-take of the televised news conference if at all possible. Only in the former did he have total control, except for the instant analysis afterward by network newsmen.

According to Jules Witcover (**Columbia Journalism Review**, Fall 1970), even when Nixon did hold a formal televised conference, they were so carefully staged that they would lose all semblance of spontaneity. Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler maintained a seating arrangement, with reserved places for the White House regulars in the area immediately in front of Nixon. Therefore, Nixon came to know which of the reporters was likely to throw him a curve and which were the softest pitches.

Many reporters agreed that, when Nixon did choose to appear before the press, he did a masterful job of handling them. Early in his administration, he often sent cryptic diplomatic messages through his responses to reporters' questions. Sometimes the answers were so subtle they went unnoticed in the United States, but were read carefully in foreign capitals. But because Nixon was not able to completely control the circumstances of the conference, he preferred to avoid them.

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. maintains that this decision denied the country its right to hear the President respond on a continuous basis to questions of national policy:

> Since Presidential press conferences have no great value unless held regularly and frequently — otherwise the pent-up flood of questions makes it impossible to pursue any single topic very far — Nixon gravely enfeebled the institution that Louis Brownlow[9] thought it impossible for any President to change. This was a disservice not only to the country but to himself. For all its abundant vanities and vagaries the press in the American system served as the champion of the reality principle against the presidential capacity for self-delusion.[10]

Schlesinger further argues that, had Nixon exposed himself to constant questioning from the press over the months after the agents for the Committee to Re-elect the President were discovered in the Watergate, he could not have remained in his "professed" state of ignorance over the crimes of the men in his administration.

Later on, as the Watergate scandal spread through the White House, Nixon used the conference as a "theater of confrontation." He hoped the public would dismiss the charges as a product of biased media coverage, and reasoned (Washington Star, 3-6-75) that the sight of reporters badgering him would produce such a reaction.

The conference system as Nixon operated it put quite a squeeze on the reporter, as he held conferences while many newspapers were going to press in the evening. Some reporters would have only minutes to file their stories, so they had not only to take detailed notes on the President's words, but to mentally organize their stories during the final minutes of the conference. Little chance was left for them to look for holes in earlier comments or raise new questions.

None of these problems were brand new, and none were solely of Nixon's making. He did compound them by being the most inaccessible President since Herbert Hoover. This added to the superficiality of the few news conferences he held because reporters found they had so much to cover.

However, the President alone decides how often the conferences are to be held. He can use it, abuse it, or dispense with it altogether. Jules Witcover maintains (Columbia Journalism Review, Fall 1970), "Although Nixon had not taken the latter extreme, his very limited use of the press conference reduced it as never before to a controlled showcase for his considerable talents as a semantic shadow boxer."

Ford Agrees to Follow-Up

Gerald Ford has (at this writing) been in office only eleven months, yet he has already instituted several changes in the press conference format. Only two months after taking the oath of office, Ford decided (N.Y. Times, 10-13-74) to allow reporters to follow up their questions if they wish. By

permitting follow-up questions, Ford had a second chance at a difficult question and the number of extremely tough subjects being asked about at the conferences would be reduced.

In February 1975, it was revealed that Press Secretary Ron Nessen had begun assigning numbers to fix the order in which reporters could ask questions at press conferences outside of Washington. Sign-up sheets were posted for the Washington press corps and for local newsmen.

Although the procedure became known in February, after the Washington **Star-News'** Fred Barnes had been shifted from number 22 on the list of participants to number 38 in a February 4 Atlanta conference as punishment for the **Star's** premature release of Ford's budget message, the practice was first tried at the November Sigma Delta Chi meeting in Phoenix. It has not yet been officially adopted for use at all conferences, but it has been discussed (**Editor & Publisher**, 2-8-75).

By March 1975, however, the initial euphoria of improved White House press relations had worn off.

Ford's nationally televised press conference of the week of Marcy 3 failed to attract a full house for the first time in years. Many Washington correspondents were beginning to complain (**Newsweek**, 3-17-75) that Ford, with 10 televised conferences in seven months, was calling too many and saying too little. A decided change from the Nixon years.

Norman Kempster, White House correspondent for the Washington **Star**, complained (3-16-75) that a typical Ford conference is "a predictable series of restatements of the President's already well-known positions, interspersed occasionally with the dismissal of a whole subject as 'inappropriate for comment.'"

With Ford in the White House, Kempster says, the tension of the Nixon years is gone. The new President has brought civility and humor to the platform. "But he says just what he intends to say and no more." Even if a reporter asks a relevant question, he often gets little more than a review of existing administration policy on that subject. Actual changes in policy are usually announced outside of the press conference format.

Kempster notes, however, that the advantage enjoyed by the President relative to live television coverage — anything he says or does usually commands headlines while his critics must fight for coverage — may be on the verge of crumbling. Commercial television networks refused to broadcast nationwide the four press conferences Ford has held away from Washington. "So far, they have aired all of the available Washington conferences but it is an open secret that some network executives are beginning to ask if the shows are worth the time it takes to broadcast them."

Regardless of the President, televised press conferences have some common advantages and disadvantages. In the 14 years of the televised conference, numerous reforms have been suggested. It will be the purpose of the remainder of this paper to examine the favorable aspects and the problems, as well as possible reforms.

An Informed Electorate

The low level of interest and attention to party politics and public events in the United States is advantageous to the President. It has been found that, in the electorate as a whole, so little attention is paid to politics that information must be highly visible if it is to have any impact. The presidential press conference, in providing high visibility for the President, can thus be an extremely important channel; such conferences give the President a degree of access to the public which the opposition cannot attain.

James E. Pollard has listed five basic advantages the press conference has for the public and for participants:

> 1. It is a fairly direct way for the President to announce executive action or policy; to explain his viewpoint on issues.
> 2. It makes possible a democratic exchange between the Chief Executive and the press and radio correspondents on matters of interest and importance to the public.
> 3. The conference multiplies the possibilities of the White House acting as a sounding board for making, shaping and alerting public opinion.
> 4. It is the American equivalent of the British "Question Time" for questioning the government on matters of policy.
> 5. It makes the executive more responsible and more responsive to the public.[17]

These are advantages of the press conference as a whole, although Pollard does mention radio. The advantages of television were mentioned when Kennedy first began using it in 1961. Because such conferences are held primarily for the public benefit, its defenders argued, that benefit can best be served by permitting the largest number of people possible to attend at a convenient time. A far larger adult audience is available for the program at the evening hour; and untold numbers of youngsters can witness, at the presidential level, the governmental process for themselves.

All other government-originated information deals with material which the government wants to disseminate. The press conference affords citizens some opportunity to seek out what they want to know. The responses to questions can not only illuminate policies but also reveal something about the policy maker.

It is important that the office of the President have the maximum respect of the people, as it is the representative of all the people. The live, televised press conference helps achieve this. It can dramatize the vast range of competence which a modern President must have, the dedication he must give to his job. Television can tell the public quickly much about how the President is handling his job. As correspondents have diverse interests and different assignments on the news front, any conceivable problem may be dumped on the President at a press conference, and he must be ready for it.

In short, New York **Times** columnist Tom Wicker wrote (New York **Times Magazine**, 9-8-63), "What has been lost to the reporter may have been compensated for by what has been gained by the public . . . ." The remarks made by the President come to the viewer and the reader exactly as he utters them — "split infinitives, Boston accent, diplomatic dodging and all." Numerous Americans were probably unaware of the problems of foreign policy and the domestic economy until Kennedy's first few live conferences, according to Wicker.

Columnist Roscoe Drummond pointed out (**Saturday Review**, 2-11-61) that these conferences are also extremely valuable to the President as an instrument of influence and leadership. When he uses them skillfully, he can inform the country, develop a public opinion that can be brought to bear on Congress and develop a public understanding and support for actions which can be taken by a President only when he is assured to have such support. The President's voice can be heard above all others at the press conference. He can command public attention without tedious preparation of

formal speeches. He can seize the initiative to shape public discussion on matters on which he wants to focus debate. He can take the play from his critics or center attention where he wishes.

Television likes (Providence **Journal**, 12-19-70) them because of the drama they provide:

> ... They are congenial to the medium — a sure-fire show: the buzz-buzz of the seated questioners as they await the Presidential appearance, the atmosphere of suspense as everybody waits and hopes that in one of his answers the President may make a jackass of himself before millions of viewers. They like it, too, because network questioners have familiar faces and are recognized by the TV audience while questioners who are mere writing newsmen are not. This helps make it a TV spectacular.

Newsmen like the televised conference because they automatically provide a front-page story for them whether the President says anything or not. Of course, there is always the chance that a real story will come of it — whether straight news or a misstatement.

Pierre Salinger, press secretary to both Kennedy and Johnson, termed (Kansas City **Times**, 3-18-63) the press conference "indispensable ... an ingredient in informing the people, through the press, their representatives; we have no equivalent."

James Hagerty, Eisenhower's press secretary, said the press conference "permits the President of the United States to give his thoughts, and it gives a pretty good cross-section, through the questions, of the nation's thinking in any given week."

Elmer E. Cornwell concludes that despite changes, the press conference has been of continual importance as a channel of communication from President to public. Whatever the President says has always been news, and this has been more the case as the public desire for dramatic news has increased. Cornwell writes,

> In gross terms, therefore, all that Presidents have needed is some kind of forum, sufficiently formalized to maximize attention and regular enough to create a pattern of expectations, yet flexible and informal enough to supplement the relative rigidity of set speeches and messages to Congress. The press conference, in almost all of its various forms and permutations since its inception, has met these broad criteria fairly well.[13]

What is Wrong?

While the President sees the conference as a method of achieving publicity for his thoughts and ideas, the press sees it as a method of finding those facts not otherwise available to them. Where once the President was able to use the press conference to inform, it is now in danger of becoming a vehicle of persuasion rather than of information. This deterioration, critics charge, is due basically to the development of radio and television.

Newspapermen resent (**Time**, 1-25-60) being forced to feed their best questions to the TV competition; and they feel strongly that the presence of the camera spoils the informality of the conference. How can a news source give "background-only" material when microphones are open and cameras running?

The press conference is in trouble, says (Louisville **Courier-Journal**, 12-13-70) Washington **Post** reporter Haynes Johnson: "It is, as presently constituted and carried out, a terminal case. Rather than illuminating the workings of government, it is all too often an exercise in tedium and pomposity." The hard news content of the conference is rarely more than the President means to give out.

Television now has the ability to cover any and all newsworthy events it wishes. Coverage of such events has begun to force newsmen to concentrate on background and behind-the-scenes material. They still relate what they saw and heard, to be sure, but since millions of others saw and heard along with them, the news value of this approach is limited. Instead, they must stress meanings and related information.

Max Ways, member of the board of editors of **Fortune** and former senior editor for international news at **Time**, says he doubts the United States was gravely injured by the decline in the number of conferences in the Nixon administration. "As a medium of communication between the President and the people, the press conference in its present state of evolution seems to me slightly more harmful than useful."[14]

When he went back and read transcripts of the Nixon conferences, Ways could not find any indispensable information that reached the public through the conference that would not have reached it some other way. Nor does he find the conference entertaining:

> In press conferences, some reporters seem to be feeding the President questions he obviously wants to answer, while other reporters appear to be playing Charles Laughton in 'Witness for the Prosecution.' As entertainment, I would rank the Presidential press conference slightly above the Merv Griffin Show.[15]

Peter Lisagor, Washington Bureau chief for the Chicago **daily News**, termed the televised news conference "a catch-as-catch-can exercise in gamesmanship. It is chaotic and often incoherent. I think it is one of the last vestiges of anarchy we know in this town (Washington, D.C.)."[16]

John Hohenberg of the Columbia Journalism School has called (**Saturday Review**, 3-8-69) the televised press conference "the lowest form of journalism in a free society."

James Pollard's list of press conference disadvantages is:

> 1. It is always subject to the pleasure and convenience of the President. He is not bound either to continue them or to submit to them on the same basis as previous Presidents.
> 2. They are often somewhat irregular and lack uniformity.
> 3. It is often ineffective, as a President may turn off a leading question with a curt and final 'no comment,' to which there is no appeal.
> 4. The impromptu nature lays the President open to being caught off guard with what could be serious consequences.[17]

To these problems, none of which can be directly traced to television, may be added several others, many of which can.

No White House regular is completely free of some conflict of interest. He will normally depend on the White House staff for much of his everyday news. This leaves presidential aides in an excellent position to discipline him were he to ask

too many impertinent questions.

George Reedy, press secretary to Lyndon Johnson and current dean of the Marquette University school of journalism, said (**Esquire**, 4-73) it is an essential truth of the profession that "reporters do not like to fight the gods, particularly Presidential gods, and they do not cherish an adversary relationship. They want access, and they are as pleased to call Henry Kissinger by his first name as their editors are pleased that he is Henry to them."

The highly public setting of the conference puts the President under heavy pressure to attempt some sort of answer, however general or evasive, to almost every question. The openness of the press conference exposes him to great danger from inadvertent errors of phrasing or thoughtless candor, and awareness of this tends to drive him toward colorless responses that neither clarify the subject nor dramatize his leadership.

One of the major problems of the large televised press conference is simply the fact that it is televised. Both the President and his questioners are performing. The President must appear to be bright, quick and informed. And the reporters may think, they are actors.

John Hohenberg, quoting (**Saturday Review**, 3-8-69) William Randolph Hearst's assertion that "what a reporter does is not news," says:

> Had Mr. Hearst lived to see a half-dozen reporters jumping up at the White House like crazy and screaming 'Mr. President' at the grinding television cameras, it is barely possible that he might, just once, have declared himself to be wrong.

Certainly television offers a great potential for the President who finds a way to use it. But it also has its drawbacks. It demands entertainment for the eye as well as a quick tempo for the ear. It puts a premium on spontaneity and change of pace. Political leaders are obsessed with the techniques of television, George Reedy says, and they believe that when they meet the press today they must put on a production which takes considerable time to prepare.

And there is the time limitation. Television practically guarantees a thirty-minute press conference, more or less. It will end after this stipulated time, come what may, even if there are questions on a dozen subjects because if, by some chance, he is being hard-pressed by the reporters, he can filibuster, knowing that the conference will end soon.

Most of the complaints concerning the televised press conference center on the quality and quantity of the questions asked. Yet, many complaints can also be traced to the change in the questioners.

In the last 15 years, the Washington press corps has grown large and specialized. Each reporter wants to pursue his own interest — sometimes national, sometimes local. Rarely does a reporter manage, or even try, to ask a second question to clarify a subject he opened, and almost as rarely does anyone else follow up for him.

With the televised conference, every reporter sees himself as a personality. Since he doesn't want to foul up his moment of glory before the cameras by stumbling over a spontaneously phrased question, he usually has his question prepared long in advance. And it is often not so much a question as it is a speech. He asks this question even if it is completely irrelevant to everything that has come before and even if some earlier answer needs for clarification. This means that there is no sequence, there is no continuity, and at the end of the conference the reporters all run out of the room with about 20 first paragraphs and nothing to put beneath them.

Television also tends to inhibit tough, aggressive questions by reporters. Every newsman, when he rises to ask a question, knows he is being viewed by 110-120 million people. He will, therefore, be rather gentile about his questions because he doesn't want to appear to be badgering the President.

"The public has begun to think of reporters as a gang of hostile prosecutors bent on baiting or embarrassing the President," said Peter Lisagor. "The reporter does not want that, so he tries to ask softer questions to improve his image before the camera.

Reporters don't put enough time into formulating their questions, according to some critics. Anyone with a resonable amount of knowledge of the press can sit down the night before a press conference and write out 20 questions and be absolutely certain that at least 18 of them will be asked, and perhaps all 20, George Reedy says.

While the White House spends days preparing and briefing the President for a forthcoming conference, the reporters do very little, said (**Columbia Journalism Review**, Fall, 1970) Jules Witcover of the Washington **Post**.

> With relatively few exceptions, when the President announces he will hold a press conference, reporters check their calendars — and little else — and go about their normal business. If 200 newsmen walk into the East Room for a press conference, probably fewer than half have any intention of asking a question, and half of those remaining have thought of one on the way to the White House.

Psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers measured (**TV Guide**, 9-23-72) the number of words in televised and untelevised conferences. She contends it is no accident that at a televised press conference, the questions average 50 words in length, while at untelevised conferences, questions average 14 words.

Dr. Brothers also looked at the subject matter of the questions. She found that, in the televised conferences, questions are rarely related to each other. Without the cameras around, reporters tend to develop one subject until it has been probed in depth.

The President can very easily skip from person to person, reducing the chance of follow-up questions. It is almost impossible for reporters to follow up the first prodding question anyway in an arena where sometimes hundreds of hands are raised. This is probably one of the major flaws in the conference, and it is primarily the fault of the reporters. The press corps as a group fails to develop important lines of questioning. If the President is to be provoked into some meaningful revelation, it will usually take a collective effort. And these efforts are not often forthcoming. Even now that Ford has allowed follow-up questions, they are rarely used by the reporters.

John Hohenberg said (**Saturday Review**, 3-8-69) he understood the reporter's predicament, as he had at one time "been in the uncomfortable situation of being in the back row of several hundred standing correspondents in the White House and trying so hard to listen and take notes that I had no time to shriek out a question." He pointed out that the viewer never sees such eminent reporters as James Reston or Marquis Childs "Jump up, wave their arms wildly and yell, 'Mr. President!' "

Regardless of the individual President's attitude, there is little doubt that the press conference is a great ordeal for

him. The changed rules and procedures since Franklin Roosevelt's administration have tended to decrease the President's control over what he chooses to comment on, and to limit his freedom in speaking informally to the public through the press.

The Brookings Institution Makes Suggestions

When John Kennedy began examining possible changes in his press conference format, he asked the Brookings Institution, a privately funded research group, to explore the matter and make suggestions to him. Most of the changes proposed by the Institution memorandum (**Editor & Publisher**, 12-3-60) would have sharply reduced the freedom of the reporter to question the President. In fact, most of the reforms proposed at any time, in any administration, for the televised press conference, have been dismissed as limiting reporter's freedom.

The Brookings Institution memorandum suggested a partial return to Franklin Roosevelt's policy of allowing only indirect quotation at the press conference. This restoration would therefore eliminate the possibility of direct radio and television coverage. The memo also suggested a return to the pre-Roosevelt practice of requiring written questions, submitted either before or during the press conference. As a reservation to this proposal, the Institution suggested that it could be applied only to matters dealing with foreign policy or national security. This would reduce the possibility of a major incident taking place as the result of a misstatement or misunderstanding.

Finally the Brookings Institution suggested that large press conferences be limited to specific subjects prescribed in advance. They also recommended the institution of small press conferences with a limited number of newsmen, in which presidential comments would not be for quotation or attribution. Most of these suggestions for change have, in one form or another, been made by subsequent critics of the televised press conference.

Reform or Abolition?

Critics appear (**The Reporter**, 3-19-59) to fall into two groups: the reformers and the abolitionists. Those who would reform the Presidential press conference have suggested such changes as more systematic preparatory briefing; active participation by the President's advisers, especially when they sense something going wrong; a brief post-conference session conducted by the press secretary to clear up possible misunderstandings; and a delayed release time on publication of conference news. Many of these suggestions, if enacted, could mean the end of the live televised conference.

One of the major reforms suggested in more recent years, particularly during the Nixon administration, was simply to hold press conferences more often. Edward P. Morgan, Washington correspondent for ABC News, contends,

> Like all American institutions, the press conference is a mess. However, there is absolutely nothing wrong with White House news conferences today — nothing so fatally wrong — that the President couldn't fix it by having them more often.[21]

Max Frankel of the New York Times said (**Christian Science Monitor**, 3-28-70) they should be held regularly and geared to the needs of an inquiring reporter, not just to the President's desire for safe exposure. Frequent conferences would remove a lot of the questions that have been made

irrelevant by time and would enable reporters to focus on topics of current interest, say some critics.

With respect to the regular televised conferences, the question might be asked, why should the President change something that is now working so much to his own advantage?

Also, as political scientist Dorothy Buckton James points out, the impact of the televised press conference has almost an inverse ratio to the frequency with which it is used. If it is used sparingly, it will draw a large audience and therefore have great impact. If it becomes a regular television feature, it runs the risk of losing its audience. "Given the degree of public apathy on political matters, no president can compete on a regular basis with 'I Love Lucy.' "[22] This is a most important question: Is the nation really listening? Kennedy's first conferences drew good ratings, but there was subsequently a sharp drop-off; a drop-off is similarly shown in the recent complaints about Ford's many press conferences.

A second major reform would be to find a new way to determine who gets the floor, to replace the present jumping match. David Broder, Washington **Post** political columnist, is particularly critical of this aspect (**Editor & Publisher**, 9-7-74): "You can't have a sensible dialogue between a President and 200 jumping jacks eager for exposure."

Broder's suggestion is to limit the size of the press conference to the regular White House reporters. The wire services, broadcasting networks and the major newspapers and magazines have perhaps 30 to 40 people assigned full-time to the White House, he says:

> If those three dozen White House regulars are not competent to ask Ford 95 per cent of the pertinent questions each week, they ought to be replaced. If they are competent — as they surely are — then the other 200 of us ought to stay out of their way, and not go jamming into the East Room for the President's press conference.

The problem with this idea is the same that resulted from Johnson's impromptu conferences — experts from other agencies, such as the State and Defense Departments, are not able to question the President on matters relevant to their specialties.

Still another would be to limit each conference to a single subject. This was one of the suggestions made by the Brookings Institution in 1960. A single subject, reformers claim, would insure that the one subject would be clarified for both the viewers and the reporters. This is one answer to the complaints that there is no continuity to the conference.

There are major problems with this suggestion, too. If choice of subject were left to the White House, reporters would cry news management. It would be a sort of advance censorship, say those in opposition.

Within reasonable limits of properiety and national security, say the editors of the Des Moines **Register** (11-30-60), it would be a mistake to narrow in any way the reporters' questions. If they were to be restricted, the press conference "might have no more news value than a written statement giving the President's views." The reporters should be given the opportunity to ask unscheduled questions to seek clarification of the President's views. By the same token, the President should be able to say "no comment" on any question without a great deal of significance being read into that remark.

PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES

Herb Klein thought that one of the dangers in the modern televised conference is that reporters too often get "hung up" on technical subjects. This might mean a great amount of time spent in pursuing a question which really has no general interest which, in turn, cuts down on opportunities for broader questioning by those who are present.[23]

A solution to this problem was proposed (**The Reporter**, 3-19-59) by James Reston, who would have the President promise to provide studied answers in writing to certain technical questions later in the week. Reston pointed out that this practice would also lighten the burden imposed on understaffed Washington news bureaus, which can hardly do justice in one day to the great variety of questions and answers presently worked in at the press conference.

The burden of reform in the preceding proposals lies with the President. But many believe the responsibility for restoring the vigor of the presidential press conference rests with the correspondents themselves. And just as many of the problems deal with the questions, so do many of the solutions.

Rigorous questioning is vital, said (**Atlantic**, 8-70) columnist Hendrick Smith. "Without sliding into malevolent heckling or the rasping cross-examination of a district attorney, newsmen can confront the President with more daring and tenacity than they have done recently."

The reporter must remember that he is not there to be seen by his TV-watching family and friends, says (**Wall Street Journal**, 8-6-70) Alan L. Otten. They are there to uncover the President's policies and thinking on important subjects.

Institution of follow-up questioning is another major reform proposal. This recently adopted idea is supposed to limit the number of questions asked on different subjects; and perhaps allow the reporter to clarify one subject or policy better. There was never, however, any restriction on follow-up questions. There were few follow-ups, as mentioned previously, because reporters tended to lock into questions beforehand. According to columnist Roscoe Drummond (**Saturday Review**, 2-11-61):

> We fail by not being quick and flexible enough to follow up an opportunity, or a hole in what the President has said in answer to another question, with a prompt and pertinent supplementary question.

Another suggested revision is to ask reporters to group all questions on one main topic during the first half of the conference, and leave the remaining time for any other questions. Again, the problem remains, who is going to determine the main topic? In California, if the reporter wants to continue the same line of questioning at gubernatorial press conferences, he says 'same subject' and is recognized. This is done until the subject is exhausted.

Some reformers say simply that the conference would be much improved if the reporters spent a little more time preparing themselves. Drummond complains (**Saturday Review**, 2-11-61):

> We reporters do not devote one-third the time to preparing ourselves for the press conference questioning that the White House press secretary and staff devote to preparing the President for answering.

The proposal that probably evokes the greatest protest from reporters is the Brookings Institution suggestion that the newsmen submit written questions to a panel of newsmen or to the White House for selection. The President may then carefully prepare his answer. This would allow considerably more substance to be put into presidential remarks.

Most newsmen, however, are strongly opposed to a return to this requirement. They argue it would take the spontaneity out of the conference. The value is in the interplay of questions and answers as they unfold: one answer may suggest a vital question no one had thought of in advance. Also, the element of surprise is one of the few weapons the reporter has in confronting the President before the camera.

Other reporters dislike the idea of submitting questions to a competition where quality would be the deciding factor. Still others are suspicious of the idea of a selection panel, asking "Who will judge the judges?"[24]

Clark Mollenhoff, Washington bureau chief for the Des Moines **Register**, is against either the President or a group of the press attempting to screen the questions to be asked. In his view, "any effort to institutionalize the press conference would be thoroughly destructive to the present uncontrolled questioning by individual reporters. If the press conference is institutionalized it will be possible to control it." And who will control it, he asks.[25]

George Reedy, when asked how he would improve the press conference, said he would, first of all, extend the format to an hour. But his major suggestion was that the President should have two kinds of conferences. Once a month, he should have an appearance on television. "An hour is enough time to allow for follow-up questions." Then, Reedy said, "at least once a week, unexpectedly, the President should call in whatever reporters are out in the lobby and open himself up to questioning without television."[26]

Related to this proposal is another — that the President hold some formal conferences open to the radio and television newsmen but not to cameras and microphones. In the early 1960's, the governors of many states held two separate conferences (**Time**, 1-25-60) one for newspapermen and one for television.

Tom Wicker thinks (New York **Times Magazine**, 9-8-63) that these reforms will only anger the press if adopted. "Already most reporters feel like spear carriers in 'Cyrano de Bergerac.' They will not welcome anything that turns their most direct access to the President into more of a one-man show than it already is."

Some believe major revision of the press conference format is not enough and favor doing away with the institution altogether. These abolitionists claim that the conference is one of the worst abuses in a city where publicity has become a policy in itself rather than a product of policy.

Conservative columnist Westbrook Pegler favored (St. Louis **Globe-Democrat**, 12-17-60) the abolition of the press conference even before it was put on live television:

> It is so severely regulated by the majesty of the office (of the President) that it is not much different from a verbal recitation of the President's momentary thoughts on many, many matters, most of them trivial.

Most recent abolitionists suggest that the camera be taken out of the conference. This would do away with the tendency of both President and reporter to become actors. If it is suggested that televised conferences be done away with, however, complaints come pouring in from television and radio broadcasting people. If the televised conferences

continue, complaints are heard from the print media.

The Problem with the Solutions

Jules Witcover says (**Columbia Journalism Review**, Fall, 1970) that the one way to save the presidential press conference is for the reporters to get their heads together and agree on a plan of action. But this suggested solution cuts into the Washington reporters' prized independence, the foundation of the present system.

Witcover maintains, "Chaos and superficiality are the prices paid for that freedom," and that "some independence must be surrendered if there is to be a more orderly and cunning pursuit of the President."

Most reporters hold out little hope that the Washington press corps as a group will be willing to give up that freedom. Until they are willing, the press conference will continue as it has since 1961.

Conclusion

For the press, a mix of weekly televised and untelevised sessions would probably be ideal. But from the public's viewpoint, the televised press conference is preferable. It is by no means perfect. The questions are sometimes foggy, the answers sometimes vague, and the cameras tend to turn the auditorium into a theater. Yet the presidential press conference is the last place anyone can get up and ask a serious question of the President of the United States and have a good chance of getting an answer.

Washington seems to have accepted the fact that the camera is here to stay, an acceptance that has not been easy for some newspapermen, however. Said Louis Lyons (**Time**, 1-25-60), a one-time newspaperman and television-man, "With TV cameras, it becomes a performance, not a real press conference."

For most reporters, the most important point is that there be a press conference. Said Richard L. Strout in the **New Republic** (4-16-66), when a modern President foregoes the regular press conference, even with its many faults, "you are apt to get a substitute: government by leak, information by seepage, news-ooze."

From the President' point of view, presidential scholar Clinton Rossiter says,

> The President could not ask for a tool of leadership more perfectly designed to his ends, for a pulpit more artfully constructed from which to preach sermons to us and to the world, for a listening device more finely tuned to hear the opinions and fears and complaints of the American people[27]

No President in his right mind would surrender the power he draws from this unique institution, Rossiter says. It puts him, in a light he selects for himself, on the front page of every newspaper in the country.

Norman Kempster pointed out (**Washington Star**, 3-16-75) that there is no real consensus about what the press conference should be. In an ideal world, presumably, the President would answer all questions fully and completely, taking the public totally into his confidence. But this is not an ideal world.

"In the real world, it can be assumed that Presidents will continue to shape their press conferences to suit their own personalities."

FOOTNOTES

1. Burton H. Kaufman (Ed.), **Washington's Farewell Address: The View from the 20th Century** (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 25.
2. Bernard Rubin, **Political Television** (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), p. 81.
3. **Ibid.**, p. 80.
4. Bruce Lisle, **Crisis in Credibility** (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968), p. 55.
5. **Ibid.**, pp. 56-62.
6. David Wise, **The Politics of Lying** (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), p. 157.
7. **Ibid.**, p. 456.
8. Edward P. Morgan, Max Ways, Clark Mollenhoff, Peter Lisagor, Herbert G. Klein, **The Presidency and the Press Conference** (Washington, D. C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1971), p. 6.
9. Louis Brownlow, a journalist, had observed the press conference grow to its present status. He said of the conference, "It would be almost impossible for any President now to change this pattern or interfere in any material way with this institution. Set up without authority of the law, required by no Constitutional mandate, embodying no rights enforceable in a court of law, but nevertheless an institution of prime importance in the political life of the American people."
10. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., **The Imperial Presidency** (New York: Popular Library, 1974), p. 221.
11. Dorothy Buckton James, **The Contemporary Presidency** (New York: Pegasus Books, 1969), p. 45.
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13. Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., **Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion** (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 206-207.
14. Morgan, et al., **op. cit.**, p. 14.
15. **Ibid.**, p. 14.
16. **Ibid.**, p. 15.
17. Pollard, **op. cit.**, pp. 24-25.
18. George Reedy, **The Presidency in Flux** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 72.
19. Morgan, et al., **op. cit.**, p. 16.
20. Reedy, **op. cit.**, p. 63.
21. Morgan, et al., **op. cit.**, p. 23.
22. James, **op. cit.**, p. 52.
23. Morgan, et al., **op. cit.**, p. 5.
24. **Straus Editor's Report**, No. 62, 9-27-70.
25. Morgan, et al., **op. cit.**, p. 70.
26. Reedy, **op. cit.**, pp. 64-65.
27. Clinton Rossiter, **The American Presidency** (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 112.